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Unknowing the unknowable. From 'critical war studies' to a critique of war

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ABSTRACT

Recent critical interventions challenge the Enlightenment critique of war as the radical antithesis of 'peace'. The negation of war as an epitome of unreason is, indeed, dangerous to the extent that it tends to excite pacifying 'wars against war'. Yet, what follows from this? The article argues that a popular counter-perspective, which conceives of war as a 'tamed' and reasonable exercise, itself premised on the imagination of an essentially antagonistic and generative political space, is just as dangerous. It constructs war as a real object of knowledge, a social reality. Asking whether the critique of 'police war' can be reconciled with a critique of the ontology of war proper, the article reads Walter Benjamin and concludes that we should return to the Enlightenment's view of war as unknowable chaos and disorder. Only instead of negating and fighting war, a fundamental critique ought turn this perspective on its head and affirm war in its unintelligibility, its impossibility.

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'War is impossible, and yet it takes place. But the fact that it takes places in no way detracts from its impossibility'. This acute statement by Jean Baudrillard conveys an important insight: War defies rational comprehension; nevertheless, it becomes rationalized. Or, as Baudrillard went on: 'The system is absurd and yet it functions. But the fact that it functions in no way detracts from its absurdity' (2006, 25). If we accept the premise of war as a fundamentally 'absurd' undertaking, we need to acknowledge a deep-seated paradox: Although wars are widely condemned and outlawed, they continue unabated, fought as fiercely and cruel as ever. Why? Given the nearly universal consensus on the undesirability of war, should it not be the easiest thing in the world to confine this absurdity, once and for all, to the ash heap of history, to turn swords into ploughshares? Critical engagements, concerned with ostensible 'root causes', economics, power, biology, human psychology, and so forth, can fill entire libraries. Why have they had so little impact? Are they barking up the wrong tree? Or, rather: Are they possibly missing a far more fundamental issue at stake here – that is, the 'impossibility' and 'absurdity' of war itself?

Modern rejections of war are by and large indebted to Enlightenment thought. In his 'Encyclopedia', Denis Diderot recognized in war the 'fruit of man's depravity', a

'convulsive and violent sickness of the body politic' (2012, 76). The task is thus to find a cure to the disease: to impose order onto chaos, to civilize, to pacify. However, and to further complicate matters, recent critical interventions have severely questioned the ethical foundation of this perspective. Drawing on thinkers as diverse as Michel Foucault, Karl Marx, or Baruch Spinoza, they argue that those very efforts to eliminate war go a long way in actually generating it in the first place: the 'liberal way of war' (Dillon and Reid 2009), war as 'pacification' (Neocleous 2014), 'peace as war' (Polat 2010). War is a rational practice of violent social ordering, purifying, homogenizing – of universally enforcing a certain imagination of 'peace' and 'security'.

A second camp of academics follows Carl von Clausewitz and locates the 'ontology' of war in 'fighting'. Calling for a 'critical war studies', Tarak Barkawi and Shane Brighton emphasize its constitutive 'excess'. 'War', we are told, 'is a generative force like no other' (2011, 126). More than mere pacification and the enforcement of order, it is a 'destroyer and maker of truths' (127), which has the 'capacity to rework the reality of social and political existence' (136).

Both interventions challenge the Enlightenment view of war as the radical antithesis of an ordered social life or 'peace'. The first suggests a trajectory from order to violence, the second from violence to order. If they are combined with each other, a fairly pessimistic picture begins to take shape: War makes and remakes order, and yet, any such order continues to wage war. To be sure, the argument here does not refute the validity of any of these important critical contributions. They actually correspond, it will be suggested, to the cycle of 'mythical' violence that Walter Benjamin outlines in his famous essay 'Critique of violence' (1986). Following Benjamin, this article does, however, question whether such 'mythical' accounts alone suffice for formulating a 'critique' of war proper.

The first part considers the 'peace as war' or 'police war' argument. It agrees that a perspective of war as some kind of barbarism is dangerous to the extent that it tends to excite pacifying 'wars against war'. Yet what follows from this insight? Do we need a *different* understanding of war? For many critics this question is not of primary importance, since they are less concerned with 'war' as such than with a critique of the order in the name of which wars are waged, be it bio-politics or capitalism. Nevertheless, the logical counter-perspective is all too obvious: Instead of being condemned as the epitome of unreason, war ought to be rationalized as the reciprocal encounter between opposing forces. Is this what 'critical war studies' does? Astrid Nordin and Dan Öberg have criticized Barkawi and Brighton on precisely these grounds. With reference to Baudrillard, they claim that such a viewpoint contributes to the imagination of war as a comprehensible and thus 'real' object of knowledge – a reasonable choice, a possible course of action, a social reality (2015). The critical study of war runs into the danger of becoming complicit with the construction of war itself.

The second part of the argument shares this concern with proposing something like a rational ontology of war and conflict, especially if it is also presented as a 'generative' force. Its intellectual centre of gravity is not so much encountered in 'critical war studies', however, as in Nazi Germany. It runs through a line of thought that can be traced from Carl Schmitt over Martin Heidegger to Erich Ludendorff. As will be argued, the attempt to 'tame' war in this manner might actually result in a delirious call for 'total war'. Is there a way of avoiding such dangerous pitfalls? The proposal of Chantal

Mouffe (2005) and others to solve this problem by shifting from ‘antagonistic’ to ‘agonistic’ encounters is not fully satisfying, since it continues to rely on some measure of disciplinary and violent policing (see Shinko 2008). Hence, the following question emerges: Can the critique of ‘police war’ be reconciled with a critique of the ontology of war more generally?

Although building on the thoughts of Nordin and Öberg, the third part suggests that we do not necessarily need Baudrillard to answer this question. Indeed, Barkawi’s and Brighton’s careful reading of von Clausewitz already goes some way in this direction: War is never fully rational, never a mere instrument in the service of independent political aims; beset by the forces of radical contingency and chance, it *destroys* orders as much as it creates them anew. To set this position clearly apart from the vindicators of war in Nazi Germany, it is helpful to consider Benjamin’s notion of ‘divine’ violence, which he places in opposition to the ‘mythical’ rationalization of war.

Reading Benjamin, the article concludes that a critique of war ought to *return* to the Enlightenment premise of war as unknowable chaos and disorder. The problem is not the imagination of war that this perspective evokes, for it effectively guards us against a line of reasoning that culminates in ‘total war’. The problem, rather, is with the conclusion drawn from this. War, that is, should not be negated and fought in ‘police wars’; instead, we should *affirm* war in its unintelligibility, its impossibility.

Police war: the negation of stasis

Plato refers to ‘two distinct kinds of war’ (1961, 19): πόλεμος (*polemos*) and στάσις (*stasis*). As he has Socrates say in *The Republic*, ‘the term employed for the hostility of the friendly is [stasis], and for that of the alien is [polemos]’. Usually translated as ‘civil war’, *stasis* is a war between ‘friends’, that is, between people who should ‘naturally’ be forming a political community. It therefore denotes a ‘sick’ polity (1937, 497) – a condition of anarchic being wherein any semblance of social and political order has given sway to a decidedly unpolitical orgy of violence. ‘Of all wars’, Plato remarks in *Laws*, *stasis* is ‘the most bitter’ (1961, 19). Thucydides provides a detailed depiction of *stasis* in his ‘History of the Peloponnesian War’ (see 1975, 222–5). As the English translation by Thomas Hobbes tells us, it involves a reversal of all values:

inconsiderate boldness was counted true-hearted manliness; provident deliberation, a handsome fear; modesty, the cloak of cowardice; to be wise in everything, to be lazy in everything. A furious suddenness was reputed a point of valor. [...] He that was fierce was always trusty, and he that contraried such a one was suspected. (222)

Presumably, this imagined condition greatly influenced Hobbes’ concept of the ‘state of nature’ as a ‘war of every man against every man’, where life is ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’ (Hobbes 1998, 84). In his well-known treatise on *Perpetual Peace*, Immanuel Kant directly picks up on this notion when he denounces war as ‘our wretched expedient of asserting a right by force, an expedient adopted in the state of nature’ (1903, 114). Unlike his contemporary thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who considers ‘savage man’ to dwell in a condition ‘without war’ (1987, 57), Kant sides with Hobbes in that ‘peace’ is ‘not a natural state’ (1903, 117) but something that ‘must be *established*’ (118; emphasis in original).



Whereas Hobbes is content with attaining ‘peace at home’ and concedes to the necessity of fighting ‘enemies abroad’ (1998, 119), Kant refuses to make any such compromise. For him, peace ought to be universally realized as an ‘eternal’ end to even the possibility of war (1903, 107, 110, 118). Kant argues in this rigorous manner because he suspects the presence of *stasis* in every war – not only between men but also between states: a condition in which the ‘depravity of human nature shows itself without disguise’ and in an ‘unrestrained’ manner (131). Reason can be consciously applied in order to overcome and ‘gain the mastery over [this] evil principle in [our] nature’ (132). The progression of civilization must proceed, it follows, through an absolute negation of any war, wherever it might show up.

Unfortunately, there is a sinister flip side to this well-intentioned Kantian project. If, as Andreas Behnke maintains, ‘war becomes the expression of the absence of Reason in the progress of mankind towards its moral *telos*’ (2008, 517), then any war that we encounter must necessarily appear backwards, as taking place among individuals who are still within, or close to, the state of nature (525–30). *Stasis* serves as the signpost that draws the dividing line between the civilized and peaceful world of reason and the wild ‘savages’ whose ‘senseless freedom’ and constant warfare ought to be ‘regarded by us with profound contempt as barbarism and uncivilisation and the brutal degradation of humanity’ (Kant 1903, 130).

To the extent that the ‘civilized’ world engages with these troubling phenomena, it does so from a position assuming moral and ontological superiority. Among the first and most outspoken critics of any such attempt to set oneself ‘above’ war was Carl Schmitt. In his book *The Concept of the Political*, originally published in 1932, he acknowledges the paradox that ‘the will to abolish war’ may be ‘so strong that it no longer shuns war’ (Schmitt 2007, 36). However, war itself cannot ‘altogether be outlawed’ (51). What is ‘outlawed’, instead, are those ‘specific individuals, peoples, states, classes, religions’ that – in a Kantian move – become identified as warlike in nature and, in this precise sense, savage and uncivilized barbarians. Whoever wages such a ‘war against war’ will tend to fight his ‘political enemy in the name of humanity’ or, respectively, ‘peace, justice, progress, and civilization’ (54). He usurps and monopolizes a series of universal concepts against his military opponent, who is consequently refused any such claim himself. This, Schmitt goes on, ‘probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity’ (54). Wars are likely to be ‘unusually intense’ (36) and can ‘be driven to the most extreme inhumanity’ (54). The enemy ‘no longer must be compelled to retreat into his borders only’; instead, he appears to be ‘a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed’ (36).

In the final section of his book, Schmitt sees the tendency to wage war in such an unlimited manner most clearly present in states ascribing to what he calls a ‘liberal ideology’ (2007, 78). Although they tend to use an ‘essentially unwarlike’ (78) and ‘pacifist vocabulary’, these states possess ‘sufficient technical means to bring about violent death’ and will ‘surely’ employ them ‘if necessary’:

War is condemned but executions, sanctions, punitive expeditions, pacifications, protection of treaties, international police, and measures to assure peace remain. The adversary is thus no longer called an enemy but a disturber of peace and is thereby designated to be an

outlaw of humanity. A war waged to protect or expand economic power must, with the aid of propaganda, turn into a crusade and into the last war of humanity. (79)

On one level it seems like a bad joke that a German jurist writing in the 1930s, and on top of that an active member and supporter of the Nazi Party, criticizes ‘liberal’ states for ‘dehumanizing’ war. Yet, in recent years, Schmitt’s writings have received increased attention among scholars concerned with what Michael Dillon and Julian Reid termed the ‘liberal way of war’ (2009). Arguably, the last few paragraphs of *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 2007) aptly summarize the central argument of Mark Neocleous’ recent book entitled *War Power, Police Power* (2014).

We might debate the motives that explain the violence unleashed by ‘liberal’ states and whether the demonization of opponents is something peculiar to ‘liberal war’ only. Yet, undoubtedly, a central feature running through contemporary war-making consists in the refusal to acknowledge those people it fights as political opponents – that is, in its refusal to confront them in a properly antagonistic, face-to-face encounter on equal footing (Polat 2010, 336–7; Holmqvist 2013).

Caroline Holmqvist (2014) draws attention to the strong parallels between the manner in which some contemporary militaries engage their enemies and the way in which the police pursue, apprehend, and, if need be, eliminate criminals. Many ongoing wars are global police wars, since they are waged from a position that claims to act in the name of an ontologically fully constituted – yet practically unrealized – universal order that must be preserved by all means and, if possible, imposed against the dark and anonymous forces of chaos and unreason, *stasis*. It is, in fact, not simply a matter of ‘dehumanizing’ the enemy in the sense of demonizing him as the incarnation of some metaphysical ‘evil’. Giorgio Agamben suggested some time ago that it works precisely the other way around: It is by radically *humanizing* our opponent, thus reducing him to his pure and naked existence, that we deny him any possibility to represent and partake in a political community (of whatever kind). He is rendered ‘bare life’, stripped of any rights and privileges that such membership might bestow on him, and left brutally exposed to the sovereign violence of the police, which may take his life at will (1998, 174).

From tamed to total war: the affirmation of *polemos*

What to make of the critique of ‘police war’? If a negation of war as savage barbarism results in limitless ‘police war’, maybe we would be better off if we affirmed war as a reasonable thing to do? Can war be ‘tamed’ in the movement from *stasis* to *polemos*? Christopher Coker shows how the ancient Greeks understood *polemos* as a symmetric (if also violent) contest between adversaries that proceeds in accordance with a set of agreed rules, and stems from the political will of each of the contestants (as constituted in the *polis*) to engage in battle (2010, 21–3). Brighton argues that for Plato *polemos* described a ‘relation presuming polity’ (2013, 664). This was ‘a form of war through which land plots were measured and distributed’. ‘Hoplite war’, Brighton maintains, ‘was *for*, but not *of* the city’ (660; emphasis in original). As for Plato himself, *polemos* is therefore ‘much milder’ than *stasis* (1961, 19).

Of course, this immediately resonates with von Clausewitz’ famous definition of war as the ‘continuation of policy by other means’ (1997, 22). He begins the very first

chapter of *On War* by suggesting that in its pure and ‘abstract’ form, war can be considered a ‘duel on an extensive scale’, where each of the contestants ‘strives by physical force to compel the other to submit to his will’ (5). Such ‘reciprocal action [...] logically must lead to an extreme’, an explosive ‘act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds’ (7): *stasis* or, as von Clausewitz calls it, ‘absolute’ war. Crucially, however, this is just an abstraction. Von Clausewitz goes on to theorize ‘real’ war – *polemos* – as a situated phenomenon, always subject to something other than war. In particular, it serves the pursuit of an overall ‘political object’, conceived and formulated amidst certain ‘social conditions’. These ‘things’, he insists, ‘do not belong to war itself’ (6). Hence, ‘everything takes a different shape when we pass from abstractions to reality’ (9). By virtue of its distinct position, the political object – the ‘original motive of the war’ (13) – acts as a mediating filter through which the concrete manifestation of organized violence becomes ‘controlled and modified’ (10).

Hence, the containment of war-as-*polemos* – set against *stasis* – is a necessary epistemological move for ‘knowing’ war in the first place – or, rather, for making it ‘real’. For Nordin and Öberg, the ontology of ‘fighting’ serves as the ‘lens’ that enables ‘the soldier to understand his or her war experience as real, the voyeur to participate in it at a distance, [...] the theorist to study war as a legitimate object of knowledge’ (2015, 394). Arguably, however, it is above all the subjection of war to an independent political aim that provides ‘a context in which acts of violence become meaningful’ (408). This instrumentalization of war relies on drawing a clear distinction between war and politics. Unfortunately, however, it does not withstand closer scrutiny. As it were, even von Clausewitz was not so sure. Towards the end of *On War*, he asserts that war and politics form a ‘unity’: War is not simply ‘instrument’ but just as much ‘continuation of political intercourse’ (1997, 357). The term ‘continuation’ is key here, for war is not only conscious application *by* the political but direct extension *of* the political. While war has a ‘grammar of its own’, it is a ‘half-and-half thing’ that ‘must be looked upon as part of another whole – and this whole is policy’ (358).

The meaning of ‘policy’ remains markedly underexplored by von Clausewitz. It is safe to assume, however, that he sees it – just like war – as an arena of conflict and struggle. War, he writes in the second book, ‘belongs to the province of social life. It is a conflict of great interests’, different only to the extent that the dispute ‘is settled by bloodshed’ (1997, 102). Indeed, ‘state policy’ may ‘be looked upon as a kind of business competition on a great scale’ (102–3). It ‘is the womb in which war is developed, in which its outlines lie hidden in a rudimentary state, like the qualities of living creatures in their germs’ (103). War, then, appears as ‘continuation’ of politics – and not as something opposed to or separated from politics – precisely *because* it expresses an antecedent conflictual or antagonistic political space by which it becomes simultaneously exceeded and (possibly or hopefully) contained (see Geulen 2002, 82).

At this point, it is Schmitt who complements von Clausewitz’ theory of war with an ontological grounding in the political. Political subjectivity, the ‘state’, ought not to be presupposed, he argues, in an unproblematic and ‘self-evident’ manner (2007, 22). It relies, instead, on a sovereign decision that makes an ‘ultimate distinction’ between ‘friend and enemy’ and to ‘which all action with a specifically political meaning can be traced’ (26). Schmitt does not qualify this ‘enemy’ in any other respect than its otherness (see 27). It is not a matter of hatred or passion. The enemy Schmitt has in

mind here is a political enemy (*hostis*), not a ‘private’ one (*inimicus*) – a difference that he relates in a footnote to the dichotomy between *polemos* and *stasis* in Plato’s *Republic* (28–9). As he goes on, the ever-present ‘possibility of war’, itself engendered by the friend/enemy opposition, ‘is the leading presupposition which determines in a characteristic way human action and thinking and thereby creates a specifically political behavior’ (34).

To substitute ‘war’ for the ‘possibility of war’ in no way compromises the central importance of ‘war’ to Schmitt’s argument. ‘That the extreme case appears to be an exception does not negate its decisive character but confirms it all the more’; indeed, the possibility of war ‘exposes the core of the matter’: ‘For only in real combat is revealed the most extreme consequence of the political grouping of friend and enemy. From this most extreme possibility human life derives its specifically political tension’ (2007, 35). It is thus that Schmitt considers ‘war’ the constitutive force of all political life. Vice versa, a ‘world in which the possibility of war is utterly eliminated, a completely pacified globe, would be a world without the distinction between friend and enemy and hence a world without politics’ (35).

Martin Heidegger went even further and argued that war is not only constitutive of the ‘political’ but – above all else – of ‘being’ and even ‘truth’. In a lecture series during the winter semester of 1933/1934 (Heidegger 2001), he reflects on Heraclitus’ famous fragment according to which *polemos* ‘is the father of all and king of all’ (Kahn 2001, 81). A year before, Heidegger had received a copy of *The Concept of the Political* (Schmitt 2007; see Elden 2006, 84) and parallels to Schmitt’s thinking are easy to discern. Whereas he refrains from relating *polemos* to the ‘military’ dimension, neither does he regard it as a mere competition, *agon*, between two ‘friendly adversaries’ (Heidegger 2001, 90). Its ‘decisive’ aspect, rather, lies in ‘standing against the enemy’; hence, Heidegger translates *polemos* as fight or ‘combat’ [*Kampf*] – a term that he takes to capture its ‘essence’. For this is a ‘serious’ matter; the adversary is not a ‘partner’ but an ‘enemy’, from which an ‘essential threat’ emanates (90). *Polemos* entails ‘searching’ for the enemy, making him ‘display’ himself, not falling for any ‘delusions’, readying oneself for ‘attack’ and increasing one’s preparations towards his ‘complete annihilation’ (91).

The generative power thus effected becomes theorized in a manner that cuts much deeper than Schmitt’s writing. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, the reworked text of a lecture held a year later in 1935, Heidegger writes that *polemos* sets things apart – and by setting-apart [Auseinandersetzung] ‘a world comes into being’; echoing Heraclitus, *polemos* ‘caused the realm of being to separate into opposites; it first gave rise to position and order and rank’ (1987, 62). Importantly, the kind of constitutive ‘war’ that Heidegger has in mind here is *polemos* and not *stasis*, making and preserving order instead of undoing it. Already in the 1933/1934 lecture, he had argued that while the ‘powers of destruction and disruption’ dwell in the ‘essent’, they become only ‘subdued and bound’ through *polemos* (2001, 92). Indeed, *polemos* cannot afford to disclose being and then retreat but, in doing so, must always ‘hold on to it’ (93). The essent is only preserved in its ‘stable’ appearance if *polemos* remains its ‘master’ (91–2).

The constitutive effect of *polemos* is therefore twofold. On the one hand, it ‘first projects and develops what had hitherto been unheard of, unsaid and unthought’; *polemos* is a creative, ‘original struggle, for it gives rise to the contenders as such’. On



the other hand, the ‘battle is then sustained by the creators, poets, thinkers, statesmen. Against the overwhelming chaos they set the barrier of their work, and in their work they capture the world thus opened up’ (Heidegger 1987, 62). *Polemos*, the permanent state of opposition against an ‘enemy’, encompasses and runs through all existence, the ‘essent’ (Heidegger 2001, 91); it is, in fact, its ‘innermost necessity’ (92). Heidegger concludes that the ‘essence of being is *Kampf*: each being goes through decision, victory and defeat’ (94). ‘Where struggle ceases’, he notes, ‘the world turns away’ (1987, 62).

This is not some harmless exercise in abstract philosophy. To be sure: Shortly after the 1933/1934 lecture Heidegger distanced himself from a ‘warlike understanding’ of *polemos* (Elden 2006, 84) and asserted that it is ‘not war in the human sense’ (Heidegger 1987, 62). Most readings of Heidegger’s reflections on the term follow him here, thereby sharply distinguishing him from Schmitt (see Dillon 1996, 97). *Polemos*, they hold, concerns an ‘aletheic’ conflict over the ‘dis-closure’ of ‘truth’ (see 95). For Jacques Derrida, it thus suggests something ‘much more essential, interior’: ‘It is the struggle of those that question’ (1993, 201). Although a valid observation, this de-politicization of Heidegger pays undue attention to the political message of his earlier lecture, where he clearly talks about the ‘enemies’ of the ‘Germanic’ nation (2001, 89). Both Schmitt and Heidegger became members of the Nazi Party as early as 1933. If Heidegger translated *polemos* as *Kampf* shortly afterwards, an association with Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* cannot have been lost on the students (see Elden 2006, 84–5). And at the very time Heidegger pondered the greater ‘danger’ coming from ‘internal’ – as opposed to ‘external’ – enemies (2001, 91), the German *Reich* was preparing its first pogroms.

Although Derrida seeks to redeem Heidegger’s overall philosophy, he nevertheless notes the way in which Heidegger relates political identity to war: ‘The community does not first exist and then come round to struggle as one enters into war. The community is struggling or it is not community, *it is the struggle itself*’ (1993, 202, my emphasis). Hence, for Derrida, we ‘are not far from Carl Schmitt’, where a state ‘identifies itself [...] only insofar as it keeps itself in opposition’. Indeed, this is an opposition ‘so radical, touching its very being, that it must have its own being as its stake, in other words, a *total war* in which the people can risk absolute disappearance’ (198–9, my emphasis).

Total War was the title (translated from German) of a best-selling book published in 1935 by Erich Ludendorff, a general in the First World War and companion of Hitler in the early days of the Nazi movement. Interestingly, it opens with a blatant bashing of von Clausewitz. Declaring himself an ‘enemy of all theories’, Ludendorff urges his readers to throw the outdated contemplations of the Prussian war philosopher overboard (1935, 10). In particular, he takes issue with the idea that war should be contained by subjecting it to an independent realm of politics (see 6–7). As pointed out above, in the course of *On War* (von Clausewitz 1997) this idea already becomes somewhat relativized. Yet the antithetical notion, implicit in a more careful reading of von Clausewitz and further developed by Schmitt and Heidegger, is now brought to its most radical conclusion: War and politics *are one and the same*. War, for Ludendorff, is the ‘paramount expression of a national will to live’ (1935, 10). Only here does the ‘vitality’ of a nation disclose itself (8). Such war cannot be waged with ‘limited political objectives’ in mind (6). What we need is a ‘total war’ that is, at the same time, a ‘total politics’ (10): a politics fully conscious of and fitted to the all-consuming objective of

national survival in a permanent state of deadly conflict. As is well known, this kind of thought was put to a terrible and most devastating effect only a few years later. Today, the first association with ‘total war’ is not so much Ludendorff, but its invocation by Joseph Goebbels in his infamous speech at the *Sportpalast*.

It needs to be acknowledged here that some ‘post-structuralist’ scholars invoke just this intellectual tradition when criticizing ‘liberal’ politics with its vision of a supposedly non-conflictual and ultimately harmonious society – a vision, after all, that potentially triggers violent police wars against the non-conforming elements. But is the affirmation of *polemos* really such a desirable alternative to the negation of *stasis*? At the very least, its proximity to Nazi thinkers and apologists should make us pause for a moment. While heavily drawing on Schmitt and presenting ‘politics’ as a constitutive space of irreconcilable opposition and conflict, Chantal Mouffe makes an effort to avoid a concordant vindication of war à la Ludendorff. She proposes to ‘keep the emergence of antagonism at bay’ by constructing ‘we/they’ relations in a ‘different way’ – that is, by converting them into non-violent ‘agonistic’ encounters (2005, 16, 19). This depends, of course, on a basic consensus regarding the terms of engagement. For Rosemary Shinko, Mouffe’s proposal thus amounts to calling for ‘a zone of ethical discipline’ (2008, 484). Otherwise, she argues, ‘democratic agonists’ end up ‘paradoxically’ presuming ‘the existence of that which can only emerge from within’ the agonistic encounter itself (480). They grant ‘respect to only those who share [their] own moral attachment’ (485). Shinko contends that most writing on the issue appears to be a lot closer to ‘liberal principles’ and the ‘liberal peace’ than it purports to be (480, 484; see also Polat 2010, 338). It, too, potentially translates into a politics that wages unbound ‘police wars’ against those resisting adherence to the rules of the game.

The critique of war, it seems, faces a dilemma. It cannot criticize the universalist violence of ‘liberal’ war, directed against the ‘bare life’ of supposedly uncivilized barbarians, without affirming or, at least, accepting the political antagonism that lies at the heart of ‘tamed’ or even ‘total’ war; vice versa, it appears that the rejection of violent *polemos* cannot be realized without waging some kind of disciplinary ‘war against war’. The final part of the argument suggests that, again, von Clausewitz as well as Emmanuel Levinas and, in particular, Walter Benjamin provide us with important clues for exploring a possible way out of the dilemma.

Divine war: the affirmation of stasis (and negation of polemos)

War is chaos – and von Clausewitz’ theory cannot be reduced to the overtly simplistic assertion that war is a mere ‘instrument’ of politics. Not only is the distinction between politics and war anything but clear cut in his work, what is more, he repeatedly emphasizes that ‘in war more than anywhere else in the world things happen differently to what we had expected’ (1997, 162). There persists an insurmountable ‘friction’ between ‘real war’ and ‘war on paper’. While the latter remains an ordered and fully manageable affair, the former is ‘everywhere brought into contact with chance, and thus incidents take place upon which it was impossible to calculate’ (67). War can thus only partly be thought of as a ‘political instrument, by which it belongs purely to the reason’. From a more comprehensive point of view, war appears as a ‘wonderful trinity’, equally composed of ‘hatred and animosity, which may be looked upon as blind instinct’, as

well as the ‘play of probabilities and chance, which make it a free activity of the soul’ (24).

The importance of ‘chance’ and ‘contingency’ in war-making has been stressed by Barkawi and Brighton in their call for a ‘critical war studies’ (2011). Despite the concern of Nordin and Öberg, precisely this aspect opens up the avenue for formulating a fundamental critique. Alongside Schmitt and Heidegger, this critique would still regard war as a generative force. As Emmanuel Levinas has it, war is an ‘ontological event’, ‘the pure experience of pure being’, ‘the test of the real’ (1969, 21). Crucially, however, Levinas goes on to suggest that the casting into presence occasioned by war is not constitutive in the sense of stabilizing, guiding, and holding on to the disclosure of being (Heidegger), let alone of affirming the ‘political’ (Schmitt). Quite the contrary, war creates by virtue of disruption and destruction; it is ‘a casting into movement of beings hitherto anchored in their identity’,¹⁶

interrupting their continuity, making them play roles in which they no longer recognize themselves, making them betray not only commitments but their own substance, making them carry out actions that will destroy every possibility for action. (Levinas 1969, 21)

Recall the passage in Hobbes’ translation of Thucydides (1975, 222): We might naively pretend to employ war as an instrument, imagine it as ‘tamed’ and subject to a guiding intelligence, perhaps even a ‘total’ vehicle to assert ourselves as a political community; yet it engulfs us completely – ‘there is no escape’ – and, in doing so, it ‘employs arms that turn against those who wield them’ (Levinas 1969, 21). In direct opposition to Schmitt, Levinas thus holds that war ‘does not manifest exteriority and the other as other; it destroys the identity of the same’ (21). Akin to the mythical *ouroboros*, war is a creature that devours itself – never *polemos*, always *stasis*. This is not to say that it fully and permanently dissolves all identity. The important point, rather, is that war, as Brighton stresses, ‘forces the unmaking and remaking of social and political meaning in ways which *defy prediction*’ (2011, 103, my emphasis).

Walter Benjamin’s essay ‘Critique of violence’ (1986), first published in 1921, helps us to further harness this insight for a critical perspective. Benjamin begins with a normative reflection on the constitutive power of violence. Our assessment of violent acts, he argues, is commonly guided by the distinction between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ violence (1986, 279). Benjamin, however, wants to take his ‘critique’ off the beaten track. He asks: What ‘light is thrown on the nature of violence by the fact that such a criterion or distinction can be applied to it at all, or, in other words, what is the meaning of this distinction?’ In a nutshell, Benjamin’s answer consists in realizing that the condition of possibility for distinguishing ‘just’ from ‘unjust’ violence (or war, for that matter) becomes effectuated by violence itself – or, more precisely, by what he initially refers to as ‘lawmaking violence’, which is ‘able to found and modify legal conditions’ (283).

If political and juridical order emerges, as Schmitt had it, from a sovereign decision on the exception and the enemy, then Benjamin emphasizes the ways in which this founding act is deeply implicated in violence. He sees it most prevalently manifest in ‘military violence’ and ‘war’: ‘there is inherent in all such violence a lawmaking character’ (1986, 283). The very term ‘peace’, for Benjamin, signifies this ‘necessary sanctioning’: ‘peace’ provides a legitimizing, symbolic reference point for ‘recognizing

the new conditions', established by violence, 'as a new "law"' (283). Benjamin clearly situates politics, law and peace as the continuation of war. Four years later, Hans Freyer was to explicitly formulate the idea that 'politics' was a 'continuation of war' (cited by Geulen 2002, 80). For Benjamin, however, this move was not intended as a justification for nations to go to war against each other, but – and forestalling Foucault's inversion of von Clausewitz' famous sentence (see Foucault 2003, 49–51) – as the starting point for a critical interrogation into hegemonic structures of power and state violence.

The state is born from, requires, and lives off violence, so much so that any violence external to it continually appears as an immediate threat that must be eliminated – not primarily for the purpose of 'preserving legal ends' but for the 'mere existence' of this violence 'outside the law' (Benjamin 1986, 281). The state 'fears this violence simply for its lawmaking character'. Benjamin alludes to the violence exerted by the figure of the 'great criminal', who 'confronts the law with the threat of declaring a new law' (283). It is thus that 'the function of violence in lawmaking is twofold'. First of all, violence manifests itself as the original 'task of "peace"' – that is, the moment of instantiating '*what* is to be established as law' (295; emphasis in original). Anticipating Schmitt, Benjamin describes this foundational act as 'the establishing of frontiers' that identifies and recognizes the enemy: 'Where frontiers are decided the adversary is not simply annihilated; indeed, he is accorded rights even when the victor's superiority in power is complete' (295).

For Schmitt, of course, the condition of the 'political' is more or less captured within this narrative. Benjamin, however, takes it a step further. Once the violent instantiation of peace is completed, violence cannot be simply dismissed; law and order are not ends 'unalloyed by violence', but remain 'necessarily and intimately bound to it under the title of power' (1986, 295). Similarly to Heidegger, who also emphasizes the continuity of *polemos* beyond the moment of creation, Benjamin refers to this second type as 'law-preserving' violence, the 'subordination of citizens to law' (284) within an order of domination and submission. It is a constantly 'threatening' violence (285), curiously aware of its brutal inauguration, aware of the fragility, limits, and impotence of law, and thus an almost-paranoid effort of desperately holding on to what may be lost at any moment. Indeed, for this reason it cannot content itself with simple law-preserving; instead, it often appears in the form of a 'spectral mixture' of law-preserving and continual lawmaking. A prime example, for Benjamin, is the 'police' that enforces the law 'within wide limits' (286). It intervenes "for security reasons" in countless cases where no clear legal situation exists, a 'nowhere tangible, all-pervasive, ghostly presence in the life of civilized states' (287): police war.

Lawmaking and law-preserving violence – or, we may say, war and peace – stand in a 'dialectical' relation to each other, depicting a trajectory of continual 'rising and falling' (Benjamin 1986, 300). Over time, the law-preserving forces exhaust themselves in the 'suppression of hostile counter-violence' – until, at some point, 'either new forces or those earlier suppressed triumph over the hitherto lawmaking violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay'. Benjamin characterizes this cyclic making and unmaking of order as 'mythical violence', and it is clear from his account that he detests it: 'all mythical, lawmaking violence [...] is pernicious. Pernicious, too, is the law-preserving, administrative violence that serves it' (300).

Importantly, this is not the end of the story. In fact, mythical violence is a rather superficial thing, already recognized by a 'gaze' directed 'at what is close at hand'

(Benjamin 1986, 300). If we widen our perspective, we see the workings of a further type of violence that Benjamin calls ‘divine’. ‘Just as in all spheres God opposed myth’, he argues that ‘mythical violence is confronted by the divine’:

If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood. (297)

Agamben notes that this initially puzzling notion of divine violence ‘constitutes the central problem of every interpretation’ of the essay (1998, 63). Slavoj Žižek agrees in that readers of Benjamin usually ‘struggle’ with what ‘divine violence’ might mean (2008, 196). It suggests – this much is certain – the presence of a force that has the capacity to radically interrupt, even break, the ‘circle maintained by mythical forms of law’ (Benjamin 1986, 300). Pointing out that Schmitt ‘congratulated’ Benjamin on his essay, Derrida sees Benjamin as ‘surfing’ the wave on which Nazism surfaced in the 1920s, since – for him – ‘divine violence’ lends itself to summoning a politics of exception (Derrida 2002, 259, 260–1). However, Agamben reminds us that Schmitt always sought ‘to reinscribe violence within a juridical context’; by contrast, Benjamin refers to a kind of ‘pure violence’ that exists ‘outside the law’, thereby exposing and depositing the very ‘relation between violence and law’ (Agamben 2005, 59). Unlike ‘mythico-juridical violence’, divine violence refuses to serve an external end, be it legitimate or illegitimate, just or unjust (61; see also Žižek 2008, 199–200). It is ‘not a means but a manifestation’ (Benjamin 1986, 294) – a violence that ‘strikes out of nowhere, a means without end’ (Žižek 2008, 202).

In order to gain a somewhat more concrete understanding, it is important to acknowledge the way in which Benjamin posits ‘divine violence’ in relation to ‘mythical violence’ as the more authentic, more fundamental force. Divine violence, he writes, has been ‘bastardized’ by myth ‘with law’ (1986, 300); yet it continues to linger at the heart of any violent action, haunting and forever permeating all attempts at lawmaking/war and law-preserving/peace. At any moment it may burst upon us ‘from the uncertain, ambiguous sphere of fate’ (295) and, when striking, undo all those neatly designed and carefully planned operations, geared towards violently installing an anticipated order or violently maintaining an existing one. Whereas mythical violence is thus merely ‘executive’ violence [*die schaltende Gewalt*], divine violence appears as truly ‘sovereign’ violence [*die waltende Gewalt*] (Benjamin 1986, 300; Agamben 2005, 62). It charts a field of unlimited possibilities, ‘all the eternal forms are open’ to it; and once divine violence breaks forth and fully descends upon us, ‘a new historical epoch is founded’ (Benjamin 1986, 300).

As far as Žižek is concerned, we can sense the presence of divine violence when ‘those outside the structured social field strike “blindly”, demanding and enacting immediate justice/vengeance’. He recounts ‘the panic in Rio de Janeiro when crowds descended from the favelas into the rich part of the city and started looting and burning supermarkets’, ‘like biblical locusts’ (2008, 202). Benjamin himself invites such associations when alluding to the ‘divine judgement of the multitude’; yet Benjamin also writes that divine violence ‘may manifest itself in a *true war*’ (1986, 300, my emphasis). Indeed, an argument can be made that divine violence represents nothing less than

the ‘truth’ of war. This ‘truth’, to be sure, is really a non-truth or, as Žižek writes, merely the ‘sign’ of a world ‘out of joint’ (2008, 200) – that is, ‘a sign without meaning’ – and we should resist any attempt ‘to provide it with some “deeper meaning”’ (200). As also Benjamin asserts, divine violence ‘is not visible to men’ and cannot be recognized ‘with certainty’ (1986, 300). The moment we would inject it with some ontological claim or subject it to epistemological inquiry, it would necessarily become ‘bastardized’ by myth, tamed.

The critical study of war can gain valuable insights from Benjamin’s concept of divine violence. It guards us against searching for some ‘truth’ hidden within war. Divine war presents war as a social phenomenon beset by radical contingency, the utterly unexpected, always in excess of reason and thus beyond comprehension – a gut feeling that greatly troubled thinkers as different as Kant and von Clausewitz. With Benjamin we can say that *polemos* refers to the ‘mythical’ realm of violence. It sets the world apart, engenders the presence of ‘law’, the ‘political’, and, indeed, ‘being’. What is more, *polemos* continues into law-preserving violence, into police war, into a war directed not against enemies but against *stasis* itself – against those ‘powers of destruction and disruption’, as Heidegger had it. Benjamin’s crucial insight lies in realizing that this ‘mythical’ cycle of *polemos*, of making and preserving, remains forever haunted by *stasis*: dissolution, un-doing. *Stasis* cannot be transcended. The ‘true’ sovereign reigning over war is a ‘divine’ force of destructive unintelligibility that we can never hope to escape or eradicate. Assuring eternal instability and uncertainty, it constantly undoes the fragile order of things that *polemos* seeks to bring forth and hold onto.

Conclusion

A critique of war needs to be premised on the unconditional affirmation of *stasis*. Against those futile attempts to ‘tame’, rationalize, and instrumentalize war, transform it from *stasis* into *polemos*, Enlightenment thinkers rightly stressed the endurance of unreason in any human war. Only, to the extent that they perceived ‘unreason’ as something ‘bad’, as something to be opposed, violently suppressed, and ultimately eliminated, they actually did little more than help to conceive and legitimize a particular kind of *polemos* themselves: a limitless ‘war against war’ or ‘law-preserving’ police war that seeks to enforce and expand a proclaimed imagination of universal order or ‘reason’ against uncivilized savages. The same problem applies to those recent calls for a supposedly non-violent politics of ‘agonistic’ encounter. The critical counter-perspective of *polemos* as a constitutive or ‘law-making’ violent conflict between ‘real’ political enemies is not much better, however. There is no guarantee that the will to survival and self-assertion in a hostile and deeply antagonistic world results in the kind of bounded or ‘tamed’ war envisioned by Schmitt. Indeed, and more than any other perspective, this position explicitly constructs and invents the notion of ‘war’ in the first place: war-making and the preparation for war as a reasonable, even necessary, thing to do. ‘Tamed war’ may quickly become ‘total war’.

Organized violence remains deeply implicated in every single ‘mythical’ epistemology of war as *polemos*. What, then, comes of it if we decide to *affirm* war as *stasis*, as belonging to the sphere of what Benjamin called the ‘divine’? Such a perspective would negate any effort to render war *polemos*; it fully recognizes that war cannot be ‘tamed’ in a reasonable

manner, that it cannot be employed as an instrument, that it cannot be known, that it lacks a secure ontological foundation in the political whereupon the decision to ‘go to war’ could be consistently justified or even imagined. At the very same time, it consciously embraces *stasis* – uncertainty, contingency, unintelligibility, chaos, a reversal of values, even; it condemns any effort to police life. The political, political life, and being itself become conceived as celebrated sites of irreducible difference and self-destruction.

This is still far from a concrete political vision, to be sure. Moreover, and unless we side with Rousseau, the affirmation of *stasis* does not necessarily entail an end to all violence. It does, however, foreclose the organization of violence for rationally construed ends. If *stasis* was ‘absolute war’ for von Clausewitz, it was nevertheless *not real*, a mere abstraction. The ‘reality’ of war only emerges once it becomes ‘tamed’ as *polemos*. The critical intervention consists in denying the possibility of containing war in this manner, in claiming that war, although it exists, is *stasis* nevertheless: that it is *at the same time* real and impossible. The move from ‘critical war studies’ to a critique of war emphasizes precisely this paradox.

When Nordin and Öberg (2015) take issue with the way in which Barkawi and Brighton (2011) locate the ‘ontology of war’ in ‘fighting’, they are certainly correct in warning against any move that purports to speak a single ‘truth’ of war. A growing body of literature demonstrates that war – as a corporeal, human experience – has multiple ‘truths’ attached to it, and the experience of ‘fighting’ might just be one amongst many others (Sylvester 2012; Parashar 2013). War has no intrinsic ontology independent from the ways in which various war-stories are mediated and processed, in turn continually reproducing (or simulating) the idea of war as something that ‘really’ exists, as something that can be known and applied.

This, however, is nothing but the ‘myth’ of *polemos*, and we might be well advised to follow Benjamin and insist on the ‘divine’ force of *stasis* that is the only ‘true’ sovereign of war. Doing so entails an acceptance of the impossibility of ‘knowing’ war, of naming and verifying a single ‘truth’ of war. Or, to put it another way: We need to realize that war *is* truth, a non-truth, a truth-machine, incessantly undoing and reprocessing truth and thereby drawing immediate attention to the hopelessness of conceiving and articulating any forever stable and absolute ontology. Barkawi and Brighton emphasize ‘fighting’, because they want to draw attention to precisely this sense of unpredictable un/making. Yet they concede themselves that ‘knowledge about war is never fully exterior to *an order war itself creates*’ (2011, 135, my emphasis). Even the statement that ‘war is fighting’ may well be eventually undone by war. In a very fundamental manner, war escapes human intelligibility. A critique of war acknowledges just that: it affirms war in its impossibility – and a global society granting full impact to this insight would necessarily be a society that does not know war.

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